Paul (in Romans) and Plutarch (in *On Superstition*): An Exercise in the Practice of Comparison

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The practice of comparing the apostle Paul to other ancient figures has been undertaken for years.¹ This kind of comparative practice has usually been done in a way to show how Paul is like the other individual being analyzed, or how his philosophy or religious thoughts are similar to others. There is a lot to learn from this way of seeing the biblical writer, not as a particular or unique figure in the history of religious interpretation in ancient writings, but as one similar to others in his rhetorical practices, and in his philosophy; in sum as one human being trying to make sense of his religious experience and of his theology.

The scope of this paper is a comparison of Paul (as we can understand him from his letter to the Romans) and Plutarch (in his treaty *On Superstition*) in order to determine how Paul is like the Greek philosopher and how he is unlike him. The assumption behind this comparative endeavour is that it is possible to compare these two ancient authors, not by asking if both works surveyed occupy any specific literary genre,² but by looking at the voice that speaks in each text. Thus, this paper will attempt to look at (i) what the text

¹ For example, he has been compared to the Stoic philosophers, to Philo, and to other rabbinic teachers. In fact, when one understands the ways in which rabbinic teachers of Paul's time used the Hebrew Scriptures to understand a contemporary problem, then it becomes easier to approach Paul. Looking at Paul through the lenses of the Stoic philosophers or seeing him as a first century Mystic opens up layers of understanding that could otherwise escape more than one reader. See, among countless others, Troels, Engberg-Pedersen, *Paul and the Stoics*. Westminster: John Knox Press, 2000; W.D. Davies, *Paul and Rabbinic Judaism: Some Rabbinic Elements in Pauline Theology*. London: S.P.C. K., 1962; E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1977; Richard N. Longenecker, *Biblical exegesis in the apostolic period*. Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 1999.

² I am shying away from forcing any literary structure or any genre (that may or may not be present) on the text.

does, and (ii) how this is done. The comparative task at hand is to find out how these different authors express their views on the fear of God and on the practice of true religion. But this exercise is ultimately about a certain journey of comparative discourse that is not worried about any elaborated results pertaining to Paul and to Plutarch. The hope is that the texts may surprise those who read this paper, as they are placed alongside each other in dialogue, so that one can watch, in humility, the fresh and surprising perspective they can reveal.

Methodology

One figure who has done very important work on the practice of comparison,³ specifically in line of the history of religion, and though certainly not being the last word on the subject, is Jonathan Z. Smith. In his *Drudgery Divine*, Smith endeavoured to do a kind of comparative analysis that is not apologetic, but one based on sound “disciplined enquiry.”⁴ He did his comparative enterprise by comparing “early Christianities and the religions of Late Antiquity, especially the so-called mystery cults.”⁵ For him, the way the term ‘unique’ is used, particularly in religious studies, has given the impression that the comparative task is “both an impossibility and an impiety.”⁶ Admittedly, the task of comparison is not an easy one and for Smith, “there is nothing ‘natural’ about the enterprise of comparison. Similarity and difference are not ‘given.’”⁷ They are mental

³ I restrain myself from entering into works of comparative cultural studies in general. This area, though extremely important in terms of opening up our understanding to the practice under investigation, would lead us afar from our present exercise.

⁴ Jonathan Z. Smith, *Drudgery Divine: On the Comparison of Early Christianities and the Religions of Late Antiquity* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990), vii.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid., 38.

⁷ Ibid., 51.

⁸ Ibid.

exercises on the part of the researcher to find out what the similarities and the differences are. For Smith, “it is the scholar who makes their cohabitation—their ‘sameness’—possible, not ‘natural affinities or processes of history.’”⁸ In other words, the comparative task in which the scholar is engaged is a challenging and interesting venture, which aims to construct something new from the available data. Again according to Smith, “comparison, as seen from such a view is an active, at times even a playful, enterprise of deconstruction and reconstitution which, kaleidoscope-like, gives the scholar a shifting set of characteristics with which to negotiate the relations between his or her theoretical interests and data stipulated as exemplary.”⁹ The goal here is to be engaged in a scholarly practice that allows the enjoyment that exists when comparing two entities that may seem more different than similar to those who read them separately. Furthermore, the exercise of comparison, seen from this perspective, is not undertaken to justify a certain pre-established conclusion but to clarify a theoretical question.

The kind of comparison appropriate today in religious studies owes a lot to the work of Smith. However, one should be aware of its weaknesses as well. Gregory D. Alles has identified some of Smith’s pitfalls in his work on failed persuasion and religious mystification.¹⁰ By critiquing Smith, he allows the research on the comparative enterprise, as proposed by Smith, to gain further strength. One of Alles’ concerns is Smith’s stipulation that “comparison is interesting only to the extent that it manipulates Differences.”¹¹ For Alles, the stipulation “is convincing only when it conflates several kinds of difference.”¹² Alles understands Smith’s proposal as a reaction against the kind

⁹ Ibid., 54.

¹⁰ Gregory D. Alles, *The Iliad, the R_M_YANA, And The Work Of Religion: Failed Persuasion and Religious Mystification*. University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994.

¹¹ Ibid., 6.

of comparison seen as “the discourse of similarity,” which was practiced by such comparativists as Mircea Eliade. Alles is confident that a generation of scholars, “inheriting a tradition of comparison fashioned in the image of difference, will find intensely interesting precisely the concern for similarity that Smith rejects.”¹³ But in spite of Alles’ concerns on some of the conclusions reached by Smith he places his comparative work on *Iliad* and the *Rāmāyana* in Smith’s terms. His work is not a genealogical enterprise in the sense of “which artifact came first and who borrowed from whom,”¹⁴ but rather an analogical one.

As we are embarking on a comparative exercise involving Paul, one cannot ignore the field of research on the apostle’s presumed dependence on the canons of Greco-Roman rhetoric. Though there is certainly value in this kind of inquiry,¹⁵ and Paul likely had some acquaintance with rhetorical methods,¹⁶ one would be prudent to distance oneself from such an endeavour simply because some of the categories have been greatly overworked.¹⁷ This paper situates itself in the lines proposed by Smith and Alles, but it is ultimately the adoption of a more personal approach on the subject of comparison. The emphasis in this paper is on the specific voice of the text. This way of engaging the text opens up more possibilities than just looking at the genre of the text.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid., 5. Alles goes beyond Smith here while he endorses him. Smith, while rejecting genealogy, embraces taxonomy, which has no place in Alles’ comparative enterprise.

¹⁵ I completely agree with George A. Kennedy that “there is need for some knowledge of classical rhetoric in reading the New Testament.” See George A. Kennedy, *New Testament Interpretation through Rhetorical Criticism* (Chapel Hill & London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1984), 57-60.

¹⁶ Ibid., 9-10.

¹⁷ A very good reference to contemporary issues in rhetorical interpretation is Mark D. Nanos, ed. *The Galatians Debate: Contemporary Issues in Rhetorical and Historical Interpretation*. Massachusetts: Peabody, 2002. The definitive challenge to scholarly opinion that Galatians is cast in the mold of the rhetorical handbooks is provided by Philip Kern, *Rhetoric and Galatians: Assessing an Approach to Paul’s Epistle*, SNTSMS 101. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.

This point can be illustrated briefly by looking at the rigid taxonomic approach. In this theoretical framework some of the questions asked are: what the text is and how one should read it.¹⁸ Though this approach has some value in helping one to analyze the genre of a text,¹⁹ it does not help in the ability to assess voice in a given corpus. The way of looking at the voice of the text, which is quite open, instead of its genre, seems to be more interesting.²⁰ The openness, which is sought for here, is in order to let the text have a freedom that can lead us to places that enchant us, puzzle us, or even annoy us. In this way of comparing voices the reader is experiencing the texts by asking, in the case of Paul and Plutarch, not if the texts are in conformity to a specific literary genre, but why it is that the act of reading one author seems to be stranger and more difficult than reading the other, or why it is that the experience of reading one is boring, irritating and the other pleasurable. The anticipated result would be that the reader is journeying through the world of the texts and is experiencing them afresh.

Setting the Time and Space of Paul and Plutarch

The following simple—or one might say superficial—sketch of the two authors is to test how their social location might have a bearing on their literary productions and on their religious conclusions. Plutarch was born to a wealthy Greek family. He was married, he had children and most of his adult life was spent as a priest of the Delphic

¹⁸ In this taxonomic approach one can look at the works of some formalists imposing a certain form or structure to a particular piece as, say, considering Romans as a diatribe in the work of Song Changwon, *Reading Romans as a Diatribe*. Studies in Biblical Literature 59. New York: Lang, 2004.

¹⁹ I am thinking here of the structural analysis à la Vladimir Propp and other structuralists.

²⁰ See Umberto Eco, *The role of the reader: Explorations in the semiotics of texts*. Bloomington, IN: University of Indiana Press, 1979. In this watershed exposition, Eco approaches his subject from the angle of the reader and tries to articulate the transaction between reader and text. One important concept developed by Eco, which is related to the kind of analysis I am doing here, is that of the open text. For more on this see Peter Bondanella, *Umberto Eco and the Open Text, Semiotics, Fiction, Popular Culture*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.

temple. Plutarch was a philosopher and a magistrate. He exercised his literary abilities in the context of a position of privilege and power. He died between the years 119 CE to 127 CE and has left to posterity an impressive body of work in history and philosophy.²¹ Plutarch seems to have had time to spare. He was not pressured by any burgeoning community in dire need of instructions in order to grow in their religious understanding. He had a certain material ease which gave him the comfort to hone his craft, and to present his case in a polished and pleasurable way. Plutarch's concern in the *Deisidaimonia* is mainly his fellow citizens with whom he feels that he can share the danger of both atheism and superstition. He had the leisure to write as a very skilled rhetorician and his writings have the potential to appeal to a more contemporary Western type of audience. Plutarch can be read without having any sense of urgency to do any introspection because he seems to be a very logical fellow with whom we could have tea. However, that is not so simple because Plutarch too, at times, seems to argue with some commitment and passion, as though something more than poetical pleasure was at stake.

Paul is more difficult to pin down. He is such a profound thinker (in spite of anything some modern readers might have against him) that there is no way to pretend he cannot be part of the conversation on the fear of God and on the practice of true religion. His position in time and space, his sense of vocation as a missionary, as a pastor and as a practical theologian, wrestling with theological and ethical questions of his day, make him all the more a fascinating figure in the history of religious interpretation. He was born Jewish, and he grew up to become a very zealous Jew with the expectation that God was going to redeem the people of Israel from its enemies and sort things out. He

²¹ See, among others, Philip A. Stadter, *Plutarch and the Historical Tradition*. London and New York: Routledge, 1992; D.A. Russell, *Plutarch*. New York: Scribner, 1973; R. H. Barrow, *Plutarch and his times*. London: Chatto & Windus, 1967.

had no children as far as we know, and he was a persecutor of the burgeoning Christian church. From his call and conversion, he had an itinerant life full of hardships and challenges. In the course of founding different churches and trying to communicate to them what he thought was the message of Jesus, he wrote several letters that have been passed on to churches, and to the world, in history. Paul is at the end of the rope when he writes the epistle to the Romans. He died as a martyr for his faith in Jesus, whom he saw as the awaited Jewish Messiah approximately around the late sixties of the first century Common Era.²²

Paul had a life full of movements before and after his conversion. From his undisputed letters one can conclude that he was a very passionate person. He is assertive, outspoken (sometimes exaggerating his arguments to drive his points home), driven to lead, and prone to be over-zealous for a cause that he might believe in. His passion for Christ would cost him the label of a fundamentalist in modern parlance. In sum, he has a compelling and complex personality. He is motivated by a single vision: to preach Christ crucified, and him alone. He operates from a post-Easter perspective and he feels that his vocation is to gather the Gentiles to share in the eschatological harvest with the believing remnant of the people of Israel. He does seem to think that he is living at the beginning of something grandiose and, at the same time, that there is not much time to spare. He is giving his all to his mission and there is no time to lose, to flounder in stylistic details that might please rhetoricians.

²² See, for different biographical issues on Paul, S. Kim, *The origin of Paul's gospel*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982; J. Knox, *Chapters in a life of Paul*, 2nd ed. Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1987; A. F. Segal, *Paul the convert*. New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 1990; B. R. Gaventa, *From Darkness to light: Aspects of conversion in the New Testament*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986; D. Boyarin, *A radical Jew: Paul and the politics of identity*. Berkeley; Los Angeles; London: University of California Press, 1994; Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, *Paul: A Critical Life*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996.

All in all, the information provided above seems to indicate that the socio-political location of both thinkers and their life's experiences had an influence in shaping how they perceived their role, the world, God, and how one should approach the divine. Let us move on in considering how one can experience the art of reading Paul and Plutarch in order to journey through the world of the texts and experiencing them anew.

The Experience of Reading Paul and Plutarch

First of all, it is harder to translate Plutarch than to translate Paul.²³ Each author has a particular rhetorical art. They share a repertoire of discursive habits, but they do not deploy them to the same effect. They ask rhetorical questions with the expectation of a negative response; they both use the interrogative form to involve the audience in their reflection (*Ti oun erou'men*- Therefore, what shall we say) and they both use pathos (in different ways and in different degrees) to persuade their audience. Plutarch is overall very elegant in his style of writing. His set of vocabulary is well assorted and rich. His examples are taken from different spheres of human activities: war, slavery, dreams, friendship, family, and medicine. Plutarch has a sense of case that is extraordinary and he can invite the reader to play in the ways he places the articles. For example, the way in which he aligns three articles (*to tov tes* in V, B 5), as if they were in a kind of circle within circles to be exploited and play with, is particularly elegant. Plutarch's syntax is not extremely difficult. Paul's syntax, on the other hand, is very difficult to follow and his arguments convoluted at times. Discursively, Plutarch is more sophisticated than Paul. However, Paul's theology or arguments seem to be more sophisticated than Plutarch's.

²³ The translation used for the purpose of this paper is the one done by A. O. Prickard in *Selected Essays of Plutarch*, vol. II. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1918.

Paul uses the Old Testament extensively throughout the Roman letter and the ways he uses it can be difficult to assess if one is not aware of his hermeneutical premise.

Paul seems to be very similar to Plutarch structurally speaking, although the language is rather different. Paul begins his epistle to the Romans by giving clues about how and what he is going to develop as his thoughts throughout. Plutarch is very similar to Paul in the way his treatise is structured. He devotes all the power of rhetorical means at his disposal to make his arguments more persuasive. He appeals to ethos, to logos and to pathos from start to finish. In a sense, we can venture to say that the *Deisidaimonia* is an ethos-driven type of document. The document relies on the reputation of the author as a priest and as a moderate man in the Greek *polis* to admonish the citizens to choose a middle way in the practice of religion.

Plutarch portrays a vivid image of the atheist and, even more, of the superstitious person. The images he offers of these types are a way to dissuade some unwelcome ways of beings and living. Plutarch not only uses the power of emotion for dissuasion, but he also makes great use of the power of reason to articulate his views on the atheist and on the superstitious. In sum, what comes out from looking at Plutarch's rhetorical strategies is that of a very meticulous artist.

As far as Romans is concerned there are also rhetorical arts that could be detected there. Paul wrote the letter to a mixed congregation of Jews and Gentiles (the Gentiles probably in the majority) to convince them that there is salvation for both groups only in Jesus. In places (2: 17-24 and 6: 1-7:12), one finds the apostle in a fictive kind of dialogue with an interlocutor (probably a Jewish one) on the unexpected turn of requirements (as understood by his fictive dialogue partner) to be God's people. Paul uses

the full array of the rhetorical art at his disposition in his theological masterpiece, but in the end the urgency of his arguments, and of his appeals, wins over the preoccupation of style.

On setting the tone of voice in both works

The introduction to Romans tells us a great deal about its whole purpose. Paul sees himself as one called for a particular task in the series of events to be accomplished in the final days of this world. According to him, he is called and separated to proclaim the good news to those outside of the covenant with no claim to grace in the eyes of Judaism. God has granted him the eschatological mission to proclaim salvation in Christ in order “to bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles for the sake of his name” (1:5). What matters to him is to have faith in Christ, and it is his understandings of the savior figure Jesus that drives his hermeneutics. Paul is totally subsumed by Christ.²⁴ At times, the reader might have the impression that Paul is experiencing something that is not quite easy for him to explain, or as if his religious experience was directing his tortuous religious discourse. His arguments are lengthy, and in different occasions, the language is terse and cumbersome.

Plutarch, on the other hand, does not see himself as one who has a particular grandiose or eschatological mission in his introduction to the *Deisidaimonia*. His purpose is quite simple: exposing the danger of both atheism and superstition (i.e. myths instilling fear of the gods) by choosing a middle ground in the exercise of true religion. Plutarch approaches his topic with a lot of candour and precision. Based on the precision seen in

²⁴ See Gordon D. Fee, *Pauline Christology: An Exegetical-Theological Study*. Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 2007.

his work, it seems that Plutarch's style would be considered as very calculated to those comparing both he and Paul. Plutarch has a Neo-Platonic view of god, and he wants to concede respect for the religious ancestral traditions of human kind wherever its presence might be.²⁵ There is in Plutarch an abstract notion of divinity whereas for Paul it is a personal and universal deity, creator and sovereign over the whole world, one who has made himself known in Jesus, whom Paul qualifies as the Christ.

Difference is not the only thing to notice when doing comparison. Sometimes it is also helpful to see how the texts are similar. Again, the aim here is to be engaged in a playful enterprise of deconstruction and reconstitution, which can stipulate a certain literary pleasure. In the case of the two authors under consideration one finds that they are both interested in the subject of religion, of God or the divine and how one should position oneself in the practice of true religion. The similarity of language, subject and style allows for opposite directions to be undertaken, while the use of similar discursive techniques makes the comparative exercise much more intriguing and telling.

For the Christian apostle, the nature of idolatry consists in confusing the creator and the created things. The motif of the universal unrighteousness of human beings in the sight of God goes through Romans. It is not so for Plutarch. For the Greek philosopher, the problem does not lay with idolatry as such, but with superstition. It is the superstitious person who practices idolatry by making objects such as wood or stones the very focal points of their devotion (*On Superstition*, VI). Paul, in the eyes of Plutarch, would be in

²⁵ For more on the religious themes in Plutarch's works see Frederick E. Brenk, *Relighting the souls: Studies in Plutarch, in Greek Literature, Religion, and Philosophy, and in the New Testament*. Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 1998), and also from the same author, *With Unperfumed Voice. Studies in Plutarch, in Greek Literature, Religion and Philosophy, and in the New Testament Background*. Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 2007.

the category of a superstitious person (unlike of course the one just mentioned) who puts too much of an emphasis on the fear of the divine to humiliate and to crush his fellow human beings.²⁶ This is, then, a fitting juncture to consider the next point.

On the Fear of God

Plutarch is trying to avoid two dangerous poles: atheism and superstition. He condemns atheism, which he considers a “faulty judgment that there is nothing blessed or imperishable” (*On Superstition*, II A), alongside superstition with its colossal damage. For Plutarch, “atheism is theory gone wrong, superstition is ingrained feeling, the outcome of false theory” (*On Superstition*, II C). Paul’s language in Chapter 2 of Romans seems to be exactly what Plutarch is condemning in a superstitious person. For Paul, “those who are self-seeking and who obey not the truth but wickedness, there will be wrath and fury. There will be anguish and distress for everyone who does evil, the Jew first and also the Greek” (2:8-9). The semantic range of the words used by Paul here is one of fear. To this, Plutarch would be staunchly opposed. While Paul is recurring to the fear of God to imply that all, both Jews and Gentiles, are in need of God’s new creation in Christ, Plutarch does not see any need for such a discursive device. In fact, for Plutarch, the very recourse to such language could be fatal to Paul’s own goal since “all fears which come of superstition is most inoperative and most resourceless” (III, 5).

When one looks at Paul’s language in light of Plutarch’s critique of the superstitious, one might be tempted to deduce that Paul’s language is effectively one of threats to instil fear in his readers, and eventually gain them to his cause. A look at what constitutes the thrust of the third chapter of Romans could give this impression.

²⁶ I will develop this a bit more later in this paper.

There, Paul's polemic is clear: the Jews are no better off than the Gentiles. And here Paul's gospel seems to contradict the Hebrew Scriptures themselves because the Gentiles, who had no regard for the law, would be admitted into God's new covenant without circumcision or a commitment to the Torah. Paul saw the incorporation of the Gentiles as the logical extension of his commitment to Christ, whom Paul came to see as the one bringing the redemption of Israel.²⁷ For the apostle to the Gentiles, the crucified/vindicated Messiah is the dividing line between the accepted and the excluded ones in God's new humanity and his visions of eschatological punishment are forced on the readers so that they are compelled to make a choice for Christ.

What would Plutarch say to all of this? He would show the correlation that exists between an excessive fear of the divine to a life of paranoia in fearing everything and not being able to enjoy the pleasurable and the simplest things of life such as a good laugh and a good night's sleep. In Plutarch's words: "Superstition does not allow a man ...to take courage, and thrust away its bitter heavy thoughts about the divine. The sleep of the superstitious is a land of the ungodly, where blood-curdling visions, and monstrous whirling phantoms, and sure penalties are awake" (III, 158). In other words, it is possible that for Plutarch there is exaggeration in what Paul is telling the Romans,²⁸ and they would be better off by not taking Paul too seriously in the way that he is pushing them to have an excessive fear of the divine. By saying that, Plutarch would not mean to discard

²⁷ See T. L. Donaldson, *Paul and The Gentiles: Remapping the Apostle's Convictional World*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997.

²⁸ A very good reference on the relationship between superstition and godly fear in the contexts of the New Testament and the Greco-Roman milieu is the book by Patrick Gray, *Godly fear: the Epistle to the Hebrews and Greco-Roman critiques of superstition*. Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003, and another very good reference, which is highly relevant to the topic treated here, is Dale Martin's book, *Inventing Superstition from the Hippocratics to the Christians*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004.

the divine altogether. In fact, in his attempt to give a moderate voice to the sphere of religious, he still finds a place for a certain respectful disposition towards the divine. He requires that “men should pray to the gods with mouth aright and just” (*On Superstition* III B, 166), and considers “the majesty of the Divine consisting with goodness, magnanimity, patience, and solicitude” (VI, E). Thus, it is not that Plutarch does not have an elevated view of God, but he does not believe that his devotion to the divine should prevent him from enjoying life while being so caught up in absurd and outlandish worries. Thus, religion needs to be under control for Plutarch.

By placing Paul in front of a moderate religious thinker such as Plutarch, it becomes possible then to consider Paul as one who is truly exaggerating his religious claims and one who corresponds somewhat to Plutarch’s superstitious person. He seems to be constantly controlled by his religious motives. He cannot make any judgment without recurring to his theological agenda and vision. Paul’s reference to the divine’s wrath on the unrighteousness of human beings (1:18-3:20), his insistence on faith in Jesus as the sole solution to human’s problem regarding the divine, and his language of sin and death - even when one is not aware of having offended the divine - would seem to confirm Plutarch’s critique of Paul as a perfect example of the superstitious person. Paul is seen as preoccupied, not by changing the social status quo and contributing to alleviate the plight of the people of the city, but as one caught up in his religious wonderings and articulating a discourse of fear, of divine wrath, and of inherited sin.

For Plutarch, the doctrine of original sin would illustrate perfectly how religious superstitions can lead to passivity, for by stating that sin is inherited, the religious practitioner does not have to assume any responsibility. The proposition by Paul that the

sins of the Christians are transposed to Jesus would seem to assume, in Plutarch's understanding, that they do not have to take any responsibility for their actions. Plutarch's critique of Paul would probably be that his language is so imbued with religious connotations that it becomes strange and hermetic. Paul, in this sense, would be the superstitious man *par excellence* who sees salvation in throwing himself at the mercy of the divine, and for whom mercy for his readers is found in their acceptance of his message. Thus, Paul's message would be the sole avenue for salvation, for he did not leave room for anything else. The least one can say here is that this kind of message would not resonate well with Plutarch.

Now as far as the critique of Paul regarding the Greek philosopher is concerned Plutarch is clearly doomed, and in need of grace and repentance. Plutarch, for Paul, would be the superstitious person he is himself referring to. Since Plutarch finds grounds for his religious beliefs in the Dionysian mysteries, which were widely accepted in his time, Paul would refer him to a greater mystery, that of Christ. Paul would admit that the pagan Plutarch has some vague, unarticulated knowledge, awareness or experience of God (Romans 1:18-23), but that Plutarch cannot see God properly nor know him adequately. For Paul, the gods of Plutarch are false gods, and Plutarch is one who is not worshipping the true creator God. Paul would not be ashamed to preach this gospel of Christ, since for him "it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek" (Romans 1:16). Thus, for Paul, any religious position outside of Christ is idolatry and in need to be corrected in view of the message of salvation in Jesus.

Paul's stance, as regards to other religions, was rooted in his Jewish tradition as seeing the god of Israel as the unique creator God. For Paul, as for any Jew, the religious devotion of the other nations are pure idolatry and he could not find any room in his thinking to legitimize any of the polytheism that was so rampant in the other religions in the name of tolerance or acceptance. The "Shema" (Deut. 6:4f.) sets forth who God is in contradistinction to all other gods. Paul's God, in this sense, is unique and demands total love and obedience from his people. He is the covenant God who speaks, acts, and asks for complete obedience on the part of his people redeemed in Christ. And it is out of the election (choosing) of a people for himself that God's truth could be transmitted to other peoples.

As we are concluding this section one can ask the following question to help in placing Paul and Plutarch more explicitly in dialogue with one another: what would be required of Paul to persuade Plutarch to change his taxonomy of good religion? It is certainly not a discourse of overconfidence, but one of open dialogue, humility and a profound desire to listen to what the Greek philosopher is actually saying about his own faith. That would enable Paul to find a way, in respect and in love, to share and to proclaim to his fellow religious thinker what he himself considers being the truth of his Christian religious claims. In other words, if Paul is willing to enter into an effective dialogue with Plutarch, he would need to be open to learning about Plutarch's faith without shying away from proclaiming what he says to be the truth of the Gospel for the salvation of anyone who believes. This leads to consider how both Plutarch and Paul envisage the practice of true religion.

The Practice of True Religion

Plutarch does not use soft criticism on the superstitious. For him, there is no limit vis-à-vis the troubles perceived by the superstitious person. Not even death is a limit to superstition. The superstitious person attaches “to death the apprehension of undying ills, and when it ceases from troubles, it thinks to enter upon troubles which never cease” (*On Superstition* IV, F). It is interesting that Plutarch’s superstitious man carries his fear with him even beyond life. The afterlife is marred with more judgments and fears that loomed over the shoulder of the superstitious, and that informs how life is lived in a constant state of fear. One thing that the superstitious person does not have is peace and joy for there is never any assurance regarding the caprice of the divine.

As we have seen before, Plutarch is also very critical of atheism. For him, “its ignorance is distressing; it is a great misfortune for a soul to see so wrong and grope so blindly about such great matters, because the light is extinguished of the brightest and most availing out of many eyes when the perception of God is lost” (V, B). On this, Plutarch and Paul share the same playing field. For Paul in Romans 1: 19-21 declares, “what can be known about God is plain” (...). “Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made. So they are without excuse.” The question of atheism is well attested and dealt with by both authors. As alluded to before, the problem between the two lies elsewhere, namely in how they define God and the practice of true religion.

In Romans 5-8 Paul seems to argue that God has solved the Adam problem, and therefore, the problem of the world. He demonstrates how Jesus’ faithful act of

obedience, by taking the form of a servant and by dying on the cross, solved Adam's and the world's problem. The result is a new creation through the covenant renewal in Jesus. Plutarch also maintains his search for a balancing act in the religious life throughout Chapters 5 to 8 of his work. Unlike Paul, however, he is not dealing with categorical human being such as Adam and Jesus. He is interested in human being in the reality of the present. His work does not address the world's problem but the trap of ordinary people as they try to relate to the divine. Plutarch does not see or propose a saviour figure to mankind. For him, the way of freedom for the common person is not by being arrogant in pretending that there is no god as the atheists' advocate, nor is it in being so infatuated with the divine that everything that happens in reality ultimately refers back to the divine, as Paul would seem to argue. What Plutarch is aiming for is a responsible life here and now, while acknowledging the reality of a life beyond what is seen and what is palpable.

The following excerpt from Plutarch is worth quoting at length:

The atheist, when he is sick, reckons up his own surfeitings, arouses, irregularities in diet, or over fatigues, or unaccustomed changes of climate or place. Or, again, if we have met with political reverses, become unpopular or discredited in high quarters, he seeks for the cause in himself or his party. (...) But to the superstitious every infirmity of his body, every loss of money, any death of a child, foul weather and failures in politics, are reckoned for blows from the God and assaults of the fiend. Hence, he does not even take courage to help himself to get rid of the trouble, or to remedy it, or make resistance, lest he should seem to be fighting the Gods, and resisting when punished (*On Superstition*, VII. B - C).

Thus, the view that emerges from an understanding of Plutarch is that he is a very calculated thinker who is not so much interested in cosmological or categorical arguments in approaching the subject of religion.

In summary, the practice of true religion for Paul finds its expression in living a life according to Christ who has been crucified and raised from the dead. The picture one has of Paul from the epistle to the Romans is that he can no longer live for the old creation, for the sake of the Torah, but for the sake of the one who called him to preach the good news of Christ to the nations. For Plutarch, the practice of true religion is between atheism and superstition. Life lived according to this delicate balance is enjoyable and pleasing to the divine.

The Citation Techniques

At this point in this intellectual exercise it is appropriate to have a brief look at how Paul and Plutarch use the techniques of citation in order to have a better understanding of the voices being analysed.²⁹ By comparing how Paul and Plutarch made use of quoted materials, an attempt will be made to show a pattern of ancient ways of writing that could elucidate the materials at hand.

First of all, before mentioning the question of quoted materials in Romans, one need to remember that there are echoes or allusions that are not directly quoted materials.³⁰ That means there is not a simple and tidy way to give a definition of Paul's way of making citations. Secondly, the scope of this study limits any pretension to any exhaustive study. What is feasible here is to look at one or two clearly identifiable quoted

²⁹ On citation techniques used by Paul in light of Greco-Roman's practices see, particularly, Christopher D. Stanley, "Paul and Homer: Greco-Roman Citation. Practice in the First-Century CE", *NovT* 32 (1990): 48-56, and Christopher D. Stanley, *Paul and the Language of Scripture: Citation Technique in the Pauline Epistles and Contemporary Literature*, SNTSMS 74. Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1992. This is an area of research where further and thorough study is needed.

³⁰ Richard B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989.

references in Romans and then at how Plutarch manages the usage of citation in his *Deisidaimonia*.

The first text is in Romans 3:9-12. In this text Paul cites either Eccles. 7: 20 or rephrases Ps. 14: 3 and inserts the word *dikaïos* in Romans 3: 10 to introduce, at the outset, a distinctive element in his gospel. Eccl. 7: 20, “there is not a righteous man on the earth, who will do good and will not sin;” Ps. 14:3 (13: 1 in the LXX), “There is no one who does good; there is not even one.” The “all” of verse 9 is in parallel with the “not one” of verse 10. Verses 11-12 develop the first line with a series of five generally synonymous echoes or allusions to the theme “there is no one righteous.” The pattern in verses 10-12 is: there is none righteous, none that understands, and all have turned away. What Paul has done here is to take the potential meaning³¹ of the text in its original context and apply it to suit his own contextual significance.

The second text is how Paul uses a word, usually read as referring to hardened non-Israelites, and applies it to Jews. The word is *porosis*. The text in question is Hosea 2: 1 as it is applied in Romans 9: 25-26: “I will call my people the one who was not my people and the one who has not been loved, and it will be in the place where it was said to them, you are not my people, they shall be called sons of the living God.” Paul, in light of the revelation of the mystery of God he believed to have received, equates non-believing Israel (belief in Jesus, understood) with the enemy of God and his people. Therefore he reduces non-believing Israel to the level of Pagans, akin to Plutarch. For Paul, there is a striking role reversal that has taken place with the advent of Christ. He goes to the authoritative writings of his Jewish background to make his point and he did so, not

³¹ For a good development of the inevitability of multiple interpretations of the biblical text see particularly Brian K. Blount, *Cultural Interpretation: Reorienting New Testament Criticism*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995.

mainly because he thought there was a fuller meaning in the Old Testament texts,³² but because it was what people did then to try to convince their audience of their particular lines of reasoning. Plutarch will serve us well to illustrate this point.

In the case of the Greek rhetorician³³ in his work *On Superstition* Plutarch, like Paul, adjusts his text in a variety of ways and for a variety of reasons. Plutarch's quotations are frequent (more than twenty in fourteen short chapters). They are taken from the old dramatists and Greek philosophers (e.g. Demosthenes, Pindar, Pythagoras, and Plato). By quotations and by allusions to a shared matrix of myths, experiences and literary resonances, Plutarch was able to drive his arguments home to his readers. In other words, he adapted and placed his quotations at appropriate places in his work in a way to construct a particular case. The modern reader who is not aware of the universe of Plutarch's audience may have some difficulty in understanding some of the arguments that are being forged. However, an awareness of the familiarity of Plutarch's readers with the authors of the past, even if only as echoes or allusions, may help to understand the function of the quotations. Accordingly, particularly through their awareness of Plutarch's thought world and sources, his readers would have a general idea of what to look for in his arguments. References to the past authors alert Plutarch's readers to consider the excess and futility of both atheism and superstition.

In sum, it seems that, though Paul has a different matrix of texts to refer to he, in a similar vein like Plutarch, goes to the shared stories and authors to make his case. Such active and playful comparison allows us to observe that when features of Greco-Roman

³² This applies very well from a biblical theology standpoint, but my point is to focus the attention to a larger perspective that needs to be taken into account as well.

³³ For a wealth of information on different aspects of Greek rhetorical practices see Stanley E. Porter, *Handbook of classical rhetoric in the Hellenistic Period, 330 B.C.-A.D. 400*. Leiden: Brill, 1997.

citation techniques are considered, they seem to indicate that Paul is not far from Plutarch in the ways he uses some discursive techniques to convey his views on the fear of God and on true religion.

The Designated “Other”

This section is a more difficult to assess for the simple reason that it is more elusive. The goal here is to test how the different authors explain what they consider to be bad examples. In other words, how do they consider people from outside their own culture, and where is the example of the good thing coming from? As was mentioned previously, there is in the Paul of Romans the idea that none (Jew or Gentile) is righteous. According to Paul “all have sinned and come short of the glory of God” (3:23). But in spite of that it seems that there is in his mind a certain graduation as to the level of moral understanding between the Jews, on the one hand, and the Gentiles on the other. The following statements seem to corroborate this point: “if those who are uncircumcised keep the requirements of the law, will not their uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision? Then those who are physically uncircumcised but keep the law will condemn you that have the written code and circumcision but break the law” (2:26-27). And it seems that Paul wants to elevate the term “Jew” to a status that it did not have before: “a person is a Jew who is one inwardly, and real circumcision is a matter of the heart-it is spiritual and not literal. Such a person receives praise not from others but from God” (2:29). By doing that, Paul saves the term “Jew” and redefines it for his own purpose. Now those who are not receiving his message are not true Jews because

otherwise they would embrace his arguments wholeheartedly. The question is: are they becoming Gentiles then? Paul does not answer.

A brief look at Plutarch's view of "the other"³⁴ will suffice to test how to explain what he considers to be bad examples. From the start, it seems that he did not quite understand the religious customs of the Jews. This is what he had to say concerning them: "for God is the hope of valour, not the subterfuge of cowardice. The Jews, on the other hand, because it was a Sabbath, sat on in uncleansed clothes, while their enemies planted their ladders and took the walls, never rising to their feet, as though entangled on the one vast draw-net of their superstition" (*On Superstition* IX, C). Clearly for Plutarch, the Jews (all included and taking the term at face value without having to redefine it as did Paul) are poltroons, superstitious people with strange ways of beings and living. Plutarch does not mute his words for the Greeks either. The following quotation, which he endorses, is far from innocent: "O Greeks, inventors of barbaric woes!" (III, F). However, most of Plutarch's references to "the other" seem to be reflecting a view that his anchor position of analysing is better than the other being referred to. He seems to be functioning as a chanter interpreting his nationalistic themes and visions in face of the oddness of "the other." The examples of the superstitious ones are taken from the outsiders so that his kinsmen can see the foolishness to follow the ways of the barbarians.³⁵

What one can observe thus far is that Paul and Plutarch operate from slightly similar, but different angles in this junction. For Paul, there is no guarantee in holding on to a certain nationalistic way of condemning the other, unless the nationalistic terms (in

³⁴ See G. Roskam, 'Plutarch on Self and Others,' *Journal of Ancient Society* 34 (2004): 245-273.

³⁵ See the excellent treatment of the construction of Greek self-definition in Edith Hall, *Inventing the Barbarian: Greek Self-Definition through Tragedy*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989.

his case “Jews” and probably “Israel,” if one takes the view of “Israel” as being a generic term for the elect including Jews and Gentiles) are redefined. For Plutarch, though he might recognize some evils in his kinsmen, the uncivilized ones are clearly the others. The Jews are particularly one of the targeted groups that serve him well to illustrate where superstition can lead to. Plutarch is very concerned to indicate to his fellow citizens where not to go in order to find a balance between atheism and superstition.

Conclusion

This study has endeavoured to explore how Paul in Romans and Plutarch in his treatise *On Superstition* express their views on the fear of God and on the practice of true religion. But the comparative exercise undertaken in the course of this paper is ultimately about a certain journey of comparative discourse that offers less control than a rigid format with particular questions and expected answers. By placing Paul in Romans and Plutarch in the *Deisidaimonia* in dialogue with one another, both texts have been rendered a little bit stranger with more questions than answers. There is no certainty in the enterprise, but humility. Paul and Plutarch appear close and foreign to one another and to us as well. We can identify with both. We can learn from both. Paul’s passion and vigour compared to Plutarch’s calculated reasoning are all challenges that we cannot dismiss easily. The apostle to the Gentiles operates from a post-Easter perspective with a cosmic understanding of what it is to be living in between two creations. His theological stand point takes hold of his language and of his life. His arguments are dense and fascinating. The reader is taken for an exiting and adventurous ride. The fact that Paul was placed face to face with Plutarch has rendered the comparative exercise all the more

surprising. Plutarch's questions and concerns, though at some level similar to those of Paul, are nonetheless different.

Plutarch is not interested in a savior figure for human kind or in cosmological arguments. His reflections are mainly concerned with the here and now for people trying to make sense of the fundamentals of their religious impulses. Though Plutarch was very much interested in true religion like Paul, his answers are quite different. His questions, placed in front of Paul, may render one uncomfortable. One of the reasons for such plausible malaise is that to read Paul with Plutarch's questions (and answers) on the fear of God and on the practice of true religion might interrupt one's habitual reading of Paul, and might appear to certain readers to be out of place or outrightly spurious. To even ask if Paul is not exaggerated in his view of God and of sin, in light of Plutarch's moderate view of the divine, could be a shock for any reader of Paul who has never dared to think of him as one human struggling to make sense of his faith and of his theology in the midst of difficulties and challenges.

At the end of this different kind of comparative endeavour, which is more open than a rigid taxonomic approach, the hope is to let the texts continue to astonish those who read them. This will be for our own benefit as readers to continue to enjoy them, to be puzzled by the very pieces we thought we possess and watch them slip through our fingers. And if that exercise stimulates more curiosity in opening, or analyzing, the different ways one can approach Paul, Plutarch or any other religious thinker, then this paper has a certain value to it.

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